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ABSTRACT

An experiment with students in a first year college German course was carried out to study the value of free writing assignments and to discover a feasible and helpful correction method. Research in English composition methodology indicates that extensive teacher's corrective marks have a detrimental effect on a student's progress. Yet, foreign language methodologists have maintained that correction and student rewriting are necessary for progress. This experiment divided 141 students enrolled in eight sections into four groups. A weekly free-writing assignment in the form of a journal was treated in the four groups as follows: (1) no errors were marked, but the teacher made comments and asked questions on the content; (2) corrections were written in the traditional way; (3) errors were corrected and comments on the content were added; and (4) errors were marked by means of a code and corrected versions were required. All groups were given a 10-minute free-writing exercise and a cloze test as pre- and posttests. A covariance analysis of the results showed significant progress in the first group on the cloze test and in writing fluency, and no significant difference between the groups on the accuracy test. An attitude questionnaire revealed favorable attitudes from the first three groups. (AMH)

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CORRECTING STUDENTS' FREE WRITING--HELP OR HINDRANCE?

Harriet D. Semke

I would first like to ask you to imagine that you are an intermediate foreign language student--toward the end of your first year in college, or second year in high school. Suppose you had worked very hard on a composition for your course in German. You tried to convey some authentic information, not just string together some trite phrases. It is a real struggle to do this in a foreign language. It takes a lot of time to look up new words, and it is frustrating, because you are often not sure how to put them together. Somehow, many of the things you want to say are not the same things you have learned in class so far. But you do your best and then copy it over so it will be neat and legible. The next day when you get it back, this is the way it looks:

(Overhead of corrected student's paper)

Try to imagine how you would feel. Would you be eager to rush home and try writing another composition? Would you feel like trying to analyze all of those marks to understand what your mistakes were, so that you don't make those same mistakes again? Would you maybe just groan, crumple your paper and throw it in the wastebasket, determined to have as few repeats of this experience as possible? Would your general enthusiasm for learning German be increased or decreased by this experience? What effect would this experience have on your assessment of your own ability to communicate in a foreign language? What effect does this have on your feelings toward your teacher?

As a teacher, have you ever handed back a paper like this to a student? How have you felt about doing it? Is it pleasant to carve up a student's best effort and make it look like this?

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In general, how do you feel about correcting students' free writing? Does it take hours to do it? Do you resent having to spend so much time correcting homework? Have you ever avoided assigning free writing because you knew you did not have time to correct it? Have you rationalized that maybe free-writing assignments are not appropriate anyway, so why not just forget it?

My own answer to these questions is yes, yes, yes, yes!

Yes, I have handed back papers like this to students and I felt awful about it, recognizing that I could understand the message, but feeling obligated to correct every imperfection. Yes, I have resented the hours I have used to correct papers, all the while realizing that students would probably not really read my corrections. Still there was that inner compulsion to find every mistake. Afterall, if I missed one, that would be an indication that I am not actually a competent teacher of German. I had to make every correction, no matter how many hours it took, and no matter how I hated the task. And yes, I made very few free-writing assignments.

Then one day at a faculty seminar at our college I heard Lou Kelly[1] speak. Lou Kelly is a specialist in teaching basic writing skills in English to college students who need remedial work. She recommended having students "talk on paper" emphasizing communication, not form. She suggested that these acts of communication should be responded to with encouraging comments and questions, not correction. In her viewpoint, the teacher's first responsibility is to listen to what students are saying on paper, just as it is important to listen to what students are saying when they speak. Instead of making red marks, she said, it is more helpful to respond and question, making inquiries which will keep students "talking on paper." After students realize that they can communicate and

that their message is being positively received, they will be receptive to suggestions and even seek advice about how to improve the mechanics of their writing.

This presentation by Lou Kelly stimulated my thinking, If this is true for learning one's first language, perhaps it would be true in learning a second language also. I began to read everything I could find on the teaching of writing--both in second language learning and in English as a first language.

I will not bore you with a long review of the literature on this subject, but I do want to give you some background for the experiment which I later conducted.

I found that foreign language methodologists have a variety of opinions, first of all about the place of free-writing assignments in beginning and intermediate levels of language instruction. There has been little empirical research in the area of writing, but there is definite evidence that the development of one skill enhances the other. Therefore, writing in a foreign language tends also to improve one's listening, speaking, and reading ability. There is really only common sense. Writing, as a productive skill, is closely related to speaking. Particularly, if writing is regarded as "talking on paper", it will lead to fluency in speaking. Speaking is the skill which it seems most students want to develop, but there is so little time in a typical class for them to practice. Writing can be done alone, as homework; so using free-writing assignments is an important way to maximize the amount of practice students have in producing language.

The next question is, if free-writing assignments should be a part of our instructional plan, how do we solve the problem of what to do with them once the students have written them. Most foreign language method-

ologists believe that written work must be corrected or that mistakes be marked, perhaps by means of a code, and that students be required to find their own mistakes and correct them. Wilga Rivers[2] admits that a systematic correction of compositions places an intolerable burden on the teacher. She expresses the opinion however, that unless written work is carefully corrected, it is of no value.

On the other hand, methodologists in the teaching of writing in English as a first language have very different opinions. The result of an experiment conducted by Marzano and Arthur[3] indicated that making corrective markings on students' papers is an exercise in futility. Either students do not read the teacher's marks at all, or they do not implement the corrections in their next attempts. Other researchers reported similar findings.

Methodologists in teaching English writing maintain that not only do teachers' corrective marks not help, they even have a detrimental effect on students' progress. Research conducted by Talmage and Eash[4], as well as others, indicates that student achievement is closely related to student attitude. Anything which has a negative effect on attitude tends to retard learning. On the other hand, positive changes in attitude have a long-term effect on cognitive growth. The following quote from Vogler[5] underscores the negative effects which a teacher's conscientiously made, corrective markings can have:

> There is nothing so discouraging to the young writer as to see his best efforts of the moment returned to him a bleeding network of red arrows, circles, underlinings, and scratch-outs.

Even the positive comments and suggestions for improvement cannot counteract the negative impact of the numerous corrections. He goes on to say:

> Once the theme has been bled to death, what's the logic in crying over the corpse? Can it take away the sting of student disappointment? Not possibly!

Foreign language educators too stress the importance of attitudes. Terrel[6] indicates that affective factors may be even more important than cognitive factors in language acquisition, and Allen[7] cites research which demonstrates that self-concept is an even more important element than intelligence in successful language learning. Jakobovits and Gordon[8] describe the successful language teacher as the one who confirms, accepts, validates, supports, encourages, believes, and receives.

Most methodologists advocate the tolerance of student errors in speech and indicate that correction is a hindrance in terms of motivation and attitude. They recognize that mistakes are indispensible to the learner and agree that students should be encouraged to be original and daring, and those who do attempt to utter sophisticated responses should not be penalized for making errors.

The evidence that these same learning theories should be applied also to writing in second languages as in speaking is not as extensive, and, where present, is most often in the area of English as a foreign language. Puhl[9] is one who states that writing should not be evaluated but accepted, contending that such an approach will enhance motivation for learning. Although some others share this position, I could find only one report of an actual experiment which compared different methods of creating writing assignments in second languages. Hendrickson[10], in a study of 24 adult learners of English as a Second Language, compared the effects of correcting all errors on student compositions with those of correcting only communicative errors. Neither error correction system had a statistically significant effect on the students' writing proficiency. He did not use a control group for which no errors were corrected, nor did he investigate the possible effects of supportive comments rather than corrections.

Therefore, I decided that attempting to determine the value of corrections on students' free-writing would be a task for me. I will try to describe my research project as briefly as possible, so that we have time for questions and discussion.

The basic questions investigated by this research were:

1. Does correcting errors on students' free-writing assignments facilitate students' ability to write and increase students' total language competence, or is correction detrimental to students' progress in language acquisition?

2. Does giving supportive comments have a positive effect on student attitudes?

3. If corrections are necessary for efficient learning, does the addition of reinforcing comments counteract any negative effects on students' attitudes which the corrections are apt to produce?

4. Do students achieve more when they are forced to correct their own mistakes?

Subjects were 141 students enrolled in the third quarter of the first year course in German at the University of Minnesota. The project was carried out over the entire 10-week spring quarter. For the purposes of the experiment, a weekly free-writing assignment was incorporated into the course. This took the form of a Tagebuch or journal. Students really could write about anything they chose--they could recount their activities for the week, they could record their ideas or opinions about something, or they could give information on a topic of their choosing. (One student consistently wrote about carrier pigeons, which was apparently a consuming interest of his.) There were eight sections of the course, each taught by a different teacher. Two sections were assigned to each of four treatment groups:

On the Tagebuch assignments of group #1 no errors were marked. Instead students received comments and questions in response to the content of the writing. Grades were based solely on the amount of understandable German produced. Since the students had had essentially no free-writing experience, the first two weeks 100 words were required for an A, the next two weeks 125 were required for an A, and thereafter it took 200 words to merit an A. A B required 150 words, a C 100 words and anything less than that was unacceptable. Any incomprehensible language was bracketed and did not count as part of the total number of words.

The Tagebuch assignments of group #2 were corrected with correct forms written in--the traditional way. Group #3 was treated with a combination of the above methods, errors were corrected and comments in response to the content were added. On the writing of group #4 errors were marked by means of a symbolic code. These students then attempted to correct their own errors and then rewrote the assignment the following week. These three groups began with a 150-word minimum and worked up to a 100-word minimum after the fourth week. The grades for groups #2, #3, and #4 were based on a ratio of mistakes to the number of words written. An A required at least 90% accuracy, a B at least 80%, a C 70%, D 60%, and anything below that was an F. Since group #4 did the re-write every second week, this group generated only one-half as much new material as the other groups.

All groups were given pretests and posttests. These consisted of a timed, multiple-choice cloze test and a timed, free-writing sample. The free-writing sample was scored for accuracy (ratio of errors to number of words written), and fluency (the number of words written in the 10 minutes allowed for the test).

The directions for the Free-Writing Test read as follows:

> You will have 10 minutes to write as much as you can in German. Just write whatever comes to your mind. Use complete sentences and write in paragraphs, but the paragraphs do not have to relate to each other. You may write on as many different topics as you wish. Write as accurately as you can, but the primary emphasis is on the amount of intelligible communication in German that you can produce in this limited time.
>
> Do not begin until the teacher tells you. When the time is up, stop immediately, even if you are in the middle of a sentence.

The directions for the Cloze Test are these:

> In the attached reading selections, a number of words have been omitted. Select from the words in parentheses the one which best fits both the grammatical structure and the context of the sentence and paragraph. Underline this word. Do not write in the words.
>
> You will have exactly 10 minutes to do the test. While you are not expected to be able to complete the entire test in that time, work as rapidly as possible and do as much as you can. There is no penalty for guessing.

A sample item from the Cloze test is as follows:

> Der Schuhverkaufer wurde ___(1)___ ärgerlich. Er hatte
> (neue, langsam, glaube, und)
>
> seiner ___(2)___ schon mindestens zwei Dutzen ___(3)___ gezeigt
> (nicht, sie, einen, Kundin) (sagte, war, Schuhe, glaube)
>
> und sie konnte ___(4)___ entscheiden.
> (der, nicht, zwei, wurde)

The posttests were identical to the pretests.

Data Analysis

The test results were analyzed using an analysis of covariance, a statistical technique which adjusts posttest scores for initial differences, as demonstrated by pretest scores, thus permitting an examination of the mean achievement of the experimental groups.

The analysis of covariance was followed by a set of orthogonal contrasts, which made the following three comparisons:

1. Group #1 with groups #2, #3, #4 (no correction vs. correction)

2. Group #4 with groups #2 and #3 (correcting own mistakes vs. teacher corrections)
3. Group #3 with group #2 (correction with comments vs. only correction)

These comparisons were tested for significant differences between adjusted posttest means with results reported in T-values.

Results

The results are presented in these tables which show the adjusted posttest means of each group:

CLOZE TEST

Treatment Group		Adjusted Mean
#1	(comments only)	34.94 *
#2	(correction only)	32.97
#3	(correction and comments)	31.91
#4	(student correction and rewriting)	31.91

*significant, p = .006

WRITING ACCURACY TEST

#1		74.88
#2		78.44
#3		75.02
#4		74.12

WRITING FLUENCY TEST

#1	(comments only)	125.0 **
#2	(correction only)	112.1
#3	(correction and comments)	121.1
#4	(student correction and rewriting)	101.1 *

**highly significant (higher), p = .001
*significant (lower), p = .004

The statistical analysis showed that there was a significant difference on the Cloze Test. Group #1, which received only comments and no corrections, made significantly more progress than the groups receiving correction.

There was no significant difference among the groups on the Writing Accuracy Test.

The analysis of the results of the Writing Fluency Test show that Group #1 was significantly more fluent, in terms of the number of words written, than the other groups. The score for Group #4 was significantly lower than those of groups #2 and #3.

An Attitude Questionnaire was administered as a posttest. The analysis of the results showed a significant difference on only five items. These were:

Item	#1	#2	#3	#4
(Possible score for items 1-3 is 6.0)				
1. I think that writing in German gave me more confidence in speaking.	4.40	4.87	4.33	4.42
2. I think that writing a Tagebuch should be retained in German 1-103.	4.81	5.13	4.42	4.27
3. I looked forward to having my Tagebuch returned.	4.91	4.70	4.66	4.26
(Possible score is 2.0; 2, 1 hr. or more, 1, less than 1 hr.)				
4. Amount of time spent writing Tagebuch.	1.71	1.38	1.38	1.53
(Possible score is 4.0)				
5. Usual grade received on Tagebuch.	3.88	3.41	3.20	3.51

The significant differences on these items from the Attitude Questionnaire are as follows:

Item 1: The mean of group #2 is higher than that of #3.

Item 2: The combined mean of groups #2 and #3 is higher than #4.

The mean of group #2 is higher than #3.

Items 3, 4, and 5: The means of group #1 are higher than the combined means of groups #2, #3, and #4.

A possible explanation for the good showing which group #2 made on the Attitude Questionnaire may be explained by the fact that a larger percentage of this group planned to continue the study of German beyond the third quarter course, as indicated on the Background Questionnaire administered at the beginning of the study. (This could be an indication that this group was initially more highly motivated.)

These results are as follows:

Groups and Percentages of Students Planning to Continue German

#1	#2	#3	#4
50%	63%	42%	50%

It is surprising to note that group #1 spent significantly more time on the Tagebuch assignments than the other groups. One might have assumed, that, since this group did not need to worry about mistakes, it would have spent less time rather than more on writing. This is an indication that group #1 still took the task seriously and were highly motivated even though errors did not have a negative effect on the grades of this group.

The Attitude Questionnaire also asked students to make free comments regarding the writing of a Tagebuch. These were summarized and a tally made of the number of students of each group expressing similar opinions. A copy of these follows.

Implications

The results of this study support the theory that correction does not improve students' writing skills in German as a second language, nor does it increase total competency in the language. On each of the measures of language ability, where there was significant difference among treatments, group #1, which received only comments, showed more progress than the groups which received correction.

ATTITUDE QUESTIONNAIRE FREE COMMENTS:
SUMMARY AND TALLY

Comments (Summarized)	Treatment Groups #1	#2	#3	#4
Enjoyable; gave me opportunity to write what I wanted to.	/////		/	//
Important; good idea; helpful; reinforced speaking, thinking in German, use of dictionary, and grammar.	///////	////	////	///
Should be given more weight as course component in grading.	//			
Was hard work, time-consuming.	///	//		
Length should be somewhat reduced.	///			/
There should be correction of frequently made errors; or some correction of grammar.	//////			
Should write half as many. On off week, revise and hand in again.		/		
Counting off for errors suppressed creativity and experimentation; felt pressured to stay in "safe" area.		//	//////	////
Disliked method of correction. Needed more explanation of corrections.		/	///	///////
Should be graded S/N.			/	
Difficult to think of a topic.	//		////	/
Unpleasant, tedious, not valuable.			///	//

The analysis of the Attitude Questionnaire revealed fewer significant differences among the treatment groups than was anticipated. Although not analyzed statistically, the free comments on the attitude questionnaire of group #1 (comments only) were generally more positive toward the writing experience than those of the other groups. It is interesting to see that six students of group #1 believed that there should have been some correction of errors on their work. This coincides with the position of Kelly[11] that, when students realize that they are communicating, and someone is understanding the message, they will seek advice on how to improve the mechanics of their writing.

In addition to the formal evaluative instruments used in this study, there were also unsolicited student reactions. One student of group #4 (correcting one's own mistakes), in lieu of submitting the revised version of the second Tagebuch, wrote a very bitter note expressing frustration at not being able to find the correct forms for the errors designated by the code symbols. The following is an exact quote: "Rather than forcing us to broaden our vocabulary as we drill our grammatical knowledge, your ' mechanische Unterricht' will purge us of the desire to attempt any writing."

Near the end of the academic quarter a student of group #3 (correction with comment) wrote an evaluative statement of over 200 words in which grievances regarding the Tagebuch assignments were described. The statement began thus: "As one who very much wishes to improve their writing skills and basically enjoys learning the German language in general, I must express extreme disappointment and criticism of the manner in which we were supposed to 'learn' to write better." Primary among the complaints was the grading system which discouraged attempts by the student to explore

new grammar and skills. This student concluded: "To continue to feel that the present system is a valuable tool in teaching students writing I feel is an insult to the intelligence of the average student. Hopefully this will be recognized and others in the future will benefit from changes in the approach to writing."

In addition to these special notes, a number of students used the last Tagebuch assignment itself to express reactions to the experience of free-writing. In contrast to the special notes mentioned above, these were all positive. One student of group #3 (correction with comment) stated that the Tagebucher had helped him learn to write, and one student of group #4 (correcting own mistakes and rewriting) referred to the writing of a Tagebuch as a pleasant experience. However, nine students of group #1 made favorable comments about the free-writing assignments. According to these students, writing a Tagebuch was helpful, fun, and a good learning experience.

There was unanimous agreement among the eight instructors that free-writing assignments had added an important dimension to the course German 1-103. Some believed that making the assignments somewhat more structured, e.g., at least occasionally giving assigned topics, might be an improvement.

A side benefit of treatment #1 (comment only) is that it removed the temptation for students to cheat by copying. Among groups #2, #3, and #4 there were seven instances of near-certainty (if not complete certainty) that the Tagebuch assignments submitted were not original. This never happened in group #1.

In general, the findings of this study point to treatment #1 (comments only) as most preferred and identify treatment #4 (requiring students to correct own mistakes and re-write work) as least preferred.

However, this may not be due to the different treatment methods per se, but rather to the differences in the quantity of writing practice. In order to achieve A's, group #1 needed to write twice as much as groups #2 and #3. Group #4, on the other hand, because of revisions, wrote much less new material. This difference in quantity was most certainly one of the crucial factors in determining the difference among the groups in fluency scores. What is most unexpected is that group #4, which corrected its own errors, did not do better on accuracy, as measured by the accuracy scores on the Free-Writing Test. This gives additional evidence that accuracy, as well as fluency, is affected positively by practice.

While the results of this research cannot be generalized beyond the group of students involved in the project, they do demonstrate that for this group of students over this ten-week period of time, the absence of correction on free-writing assignments did not have a detrimental effect on progress in language learning, as measured by the instruments of this research. The amount of practice, on the other hand, even without correction, did appear to have a positive effect on achievement.

In summary, the initial questions posed by this research are answered as follows:

1. The time which teachers use in correcting students' original compositions is not well-spent. The results of this study indicate that student achievement is enhanced by writing practice alone, that corrections do not significantly increase writing skills, and that corrections tend to have a negative effect on general language proficiency and writing fluency.

2. Giving supportive comments in lieu of correction appears to have a positive effect on student attitudes toward writing and toward the target language in general. While the answer to this question is not as

unqualified as was hoped, there is evidence to support this conclusion.

3. The addition of reinforcing comments to corrections did not make a significant difference in either achievement or attitudes as compared to the correction alone. In fact, the results of the measures of both achievement and attitudes show that correction alone is equal to or superior to correction with comment. This upholds Vogler's statement quoted above that a few positive comments cannot possibly counteract the negative effect of numerous corrections.

4. Students do not achieve more when they are forced to correct their own mistakes. On the contrary, the findings of this study indicate that this treatment is least effective in terms of both achievement and attitudes.

Classroom application

The application of the findings of this research to classroom procedures would mean that the amount of writing assigned, since correction does not appear to promote competency, can be based on what is best for student learning, and need not be determined by the amount of time and energy a teacher has to correct it. Instead of enduring the drudgery of finding and marking errors, the teacher can, with a clear conscience, enjoy becoming better acquainted with the students through mutual sharing of information. The student, instead of being rewarded with the return of an assignment which may look similar to the one we showed at the beginning of this presentation, will receive teacher responses of acceptance, encouragement, and understanding. This does not mean that corrections should never be made. When a teacher notes consistent errors, they can be explained and drilled. When students ask for correction, it can be given. Released from the burden of feeling compelled to find every error, teachers can exercise personal discretion in making corrections.

One of the most important benefits of the Tagebuch is the opportunity it affords the teacher to learn to know the students as persons. Responding to the students' writing as in treatment #1, with reinforcing responses and questions in the target language so that the student knows he is being understood, results in a student-teacher communication which could play a vital role in building a positive relationship. Probably more than anything else, more than any method, technique, or material used, it is this positive relationship which forms the basis for effective teaching.

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